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A LAST WILL

A Last Will

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WILLISTON FISH



BOSTON

Alfred Bartlett

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THE MERRYMOUNT PRESS, BOSTON

INTRODUCTION



I wrote "*A Last Will*" in 1897. It was published first in *Harpers Weekly* in 1898. Shortly afterwards it began to appear in a sporadic way in the newspapers. Whenever a newspaper did not have at hand what it really wanted, which was a piece entitled "*Reunion of Brothers Separated for Fifty Years*," or "*Marriage Customs Among the Natives of the Fricassee Islands*," it would run in this piece of mine. In return for the free use of the piece, the paper, not to be outdone in liberality, would generally correct and change it, and fix it up, often in the most beautiful manner; so

that I am forced to believe that nearly every paper has on its staff a professor of literature and belles-lettres, always ready to red-ink the essays of the beginner and give them the seeming of masterpieces, and gradually to unfold to the novice all the marvels of the full college curriculum. This simple work of mine has been constantly undergoing change and improvement. Sometimes the head has been cut off; sometimes a beautiful wooden foot has been spliced on. When a certain press at Cambridge reprinted it—Cambridge is undoubtedly the home of acute belles-lettres—it used

a copy in which the common word dandelions was skilfully changed to flowers, daisies was changed to blossoms, and creeks, which is only a farmer-boy word, was changed to brooks. When I said that I gave "to boys all streams and ponds where one may skate," this Cambridge printer added, "when grim winter comes." Some writers can boast that their works have been translated into all foreign languages, but when I look pathetically about for some little boast, I can only say that this one of my pieces has been translated into all the idiot tongues of English.

The name, Charles Lounsbury, of the deviser in the will, is a name in my family of three generations ago—back in York State where the real owner of it was a big, strong, all-around good kind of a man. I had an uncle, a lawyer, in Cleveland named after him, Charles Lounsbury Fish, who was a most burly and affectionate giant himself and who took delight in keeping the original Charles Lounsbury's memory green. He used to tell us of his feats of strength: that he would lift a barrel by the chimes and drink from the bung-hole, and that in the old York State summer

days he used to swing his mighty cradle,—undoubtedly a “turkey-wing,” — and cut a swath like a boulevard through incredible acres of yellow grain. His brain, my uncle always added, was equal to his brawn, and he had a way of winning friends and admirers as easy and comprehensive as taking a census. So I took the name of Charles Lounsbury to add strength and good will to my story.

WILLISTON FISH

Chicago, September 11, 1908.

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A LAST WILL

A Last Will

He was stronger and cleverer, no doubt, than other men, and in many broad lines of business he had grown rich, until his wealth exceeded exaggeration. One morning, in his office, he directed a request to his confidential lawyer to come to him in the afternoon—he intended to have his will drawn. A will is a solemn matter, even with men whose life is given up to business, and who are by habit mindful of the future. After giving this direction he took up no other

day
— summer
— trees
— grass
— life
—
—
—
matter, but sat at his desk alone and in silence.

It was a day when summer was first new. The pale leaves upon the trees were starting forth upon the yet unbending branches. The grass in the parks had a freshness in its green like the freshness of the blue in the sky and of the yellow of the sun,—a freshness to make one wish that life might renew its youth. The clear breezes from the south wantoned about, and then were still, as if loath to go finally away. Half idly, half thoughtfully, the rich man wrote upon the white paper

before him, beginning what he wrote with capital letters, such as he had not made since, as a boy in school, he had taken pride in his skill with the pen:

In the Name of God, Amen

I, CHARLES LOUNSBURY, being of sound and disposing mind and memory [he lingered on the word memory], do now make and publish this my last will and testament, in order, as justly as I may, to distribute my interests in the world among succeeding men.

And first, that part of my interests which is known a-

mong men and recognized in the sheep-bound volumes of the law as my property, being inconsiderable and of none account, I make no account of in this my will.

My right to live, it being but a life estate, is not at my disposal, but, these things excepted, all else in the world I now proceed to devise and bequeath.

Item: And first, I give to good fathers and mothers, but in trust for their children, nevertheless, all good little words of praise and all quaint pet names, and I charge said pa-

rents to use them justly, but generously, as the needs of their children shall require.

Item: I leave to children exclusively, but only for the life of their childhood, all and every the dandelions of the fields and the daisies thereof, with the right to play among them freely, according to the custom of children, warning them at the same time against the thistles. And I devise to children the yellow shores of creeks and the golden sands beneath the waters thereof, with the dragon-flies that skim the surface of said waters, and

the odors of the willows that dip into said waters, and the white clouds that float high over the giant trees./

And I leave to children the long, long days to be merry in, in a thousand ways, and the Night and the Moon and the train of the Milky Way to wonder at, but subject, nevertheless, to the rights hereinafter given to lovers; and I give to each child the right to choose a star that shall be his, and I direct that the child's father shall tell him the name of it, in order that the child shall always remember the name of that star after he has

learned and forgotten astronomy.

Item: I devise to boys jointly all the useful idle fields and commons where ball may be played, and all snow-clad hills where one may coast, and all streams and ponds where one may skate, to have and to hold the same for the period of their boyhood. And all meadows, with the clover blooms and butterflies thereof; and all woods, with their appurtenances of squirrels and whirring birds and echoes and strange noises; and all distant places which may be visited,

together with the adventures there found, I do give to said boys to be theirs. And I give to said boys each his own place at the fireside at night, with all pictures that may be seen in the burning wood or coal, to enjoy without let or hindrance and without any incumbrance of cares.

Item: To lovers I devise their imaginary world, with whatever they may need, as the stars of the sky, the red, red roses by the wall, the snow of the hawthorn, the sweet strains of music, or aught else they may desire to figure to each

other the lastingness and beauty of their love.

Item: To young men jointly, being joined in a brave, mad crowd, I devise and bequeath all boisterous, inspiring sports of rivalry. I give to them the disdain of weakness and undaunted confidence in their own strength. Though they are rude and rough, I leave to them alone the power of making lasting friendships and of possessing companions, and to them exclusively I give all merry songs and brave choruses to sing, with smooth voices to troll them forth.

Item: And to those who are no longer children, or youths, or lovers, I leave Memory, and I leave to them the volumes of the poems of Burns and Shakespeare, and of other poets [if there are others] to the end that they may live the old days over again freely and fully, without tithe or diminution; and to those who are no longer children, or youths, or lovers, I leave, too, the knowledge of what a rare, rare world it is.



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